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RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA PRIORITY 0872
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO PRIORITY 0997
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 1750
RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE PRIORITY
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL PRIORITY 6482
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 7362
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 4649
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 9690
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY 1013
RUEHNT/AMEMBASSY TASHKENT PRIORITY 2137
RUEHTC/AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE PRIORITY 0961
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RUEHLH/AMCONSUL LAHORE PRIORITY 0601
RUEHPW/AMCONSUL PESHAWAR PRIORITY 8801
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ISLAMABAD 022024

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SUBJECT: VOX POPULI: REACTIONS TO BAJAUR MADRASSA ATTACK
AND SUBSEQUENT DARGAI ARMY BASE BOMBING

REF: A. PESHAWAR 664
[1](#)B. PESHAWAR 662
[1](#)C. PESHAWAR 659
[1](#)D. PESHAWAR 653

Classified By: Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) public remains exercised over the October 30 Pak-Mil attack on an extremist madrassa in Bajaur Agency and the November 9 retaliatory suicide bombing at Dargai Fort. In the rest of Pakistan, neither event has resonated outside of the community of intellectual elites, the military and the mullahs. Mainline Pakistani political parties worry that the Bajaur attack may be a potent issue for the religious parties in national elections later in the year; intellectuals are concerned that Bajaur was a form of extra-judicial punishment. Some military and ISI contacts report that their colleagues have been hit hard by the Dargai bombing (which killed 42 Army recruits) and are starting to complain about the costs of "a war that is not Pakistan's war." Such sentiments are unlikely to affect decision-making in the highly-centralized Pak-Mil bureaucracy, but the Dargai attack could make officials particularly sensitive to complaints that the Government of Pakistan (GOP) "could do more" in the War on Terror. The United States should continue to affirm our appreciation for GOP commitments and sacrifices. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Outside of the NWFP, the October 30 attack on an extremist madrassa that served as a militant training camp in Bajaur Agency generated less public outcry than initially expected. Conversely, the subsequent suicide bombing of an Army training facility for new recruits in Dargai, NWFP -- an attack that killed 42 young men -- also failed to generate

widespread angst or public calls for retaliation. Among the educated elites, both events are being debated in living rooms and in the English language press. Consulates Karachi and Lahore nonetheless confirm Embassy Islamabad's impression -- except as noted in paragraph 3, neither incident has garnered much popular attention outside of NWFP, where the attacks remain emotional issues. A telling point is that the Jamaat-i Islami (JI) had some success calling a few hundred supporters to the streets in NWFP to protest the air strike, but did not bother to organize public demonstrations in Lahore, where its highly-active, highly-organized student wing dominates campus politics at the local universities.

In Salons and Reading Rooms

¶3. (C) Pakistani elites -- particularly those who talk with the Embassy and those who publish English language newspapers -- continue to debate the Bajaur attack on both moral and political terms. Several have described the Bajaur air strike as a form of extrajudicial punishment. Embassy and Consulate contacts argue that a ground assault on the madrassa, in which militants could be arrested and tried in court would have been preferable. The logistical difficulties in carrying out such an operation -- and the concomitant hazards to Pak-Mil troops -- have not been part of the conversation. ConGen Karachi reports that contacts there are asking whether a less confrontational, "more Pakistani," approach to dealing with miscreants might have been more successful and less costly in terms of collateral

ISLAMABAD 00022024 002 OF 003

damage. Similarly, Pakistani People's Party - Sherpao (PPP-S) leader Sikander Sherpao told Peshawar PO on November 13 that peace accords, like the September 5 North Waziristan Agency agreement, would be more effective at marginalizing militants than violent attacks.

¶4. (C) While some elites focus on rule-of-law issues, others keep an eye on the political. Mainstream politicians worry that Bajaur will strengthen religious parties, particularly in NWFP. Such concerns were raised by many of the mainstream political party representatives who attended a November 7 dinner in honor of visiting SCA Assistant Secretary Richard Boucher. Despite worries that Bajaur and

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Dargai would strengthen religious parties, the PPP and Pakistani Muslim League - Nawaz (PML-N) have been quick to join with the Mutihida Majlas-e-Amal (MMA) to criticize the Bajaur attack. On November 14, opposition parties in the Senate -- including the PPP, PML-N and MMA -- submitted a joint request to devote a session to debating the Bajaur and Dargai events. Perhaps more telling is that the political opposition reacted to the suicide bombing at the Dargai Army base by issuing point-scoring statements blaming the Musharraf-Aziz government -- rather than the extremist perpetrators -- for the attack.

Meanwhile, on the Frontlines. . . .

¶5. (C) On the margins of the November 11 ISAF-Afghan-Pak-Mil Tripartite Commission Plenary, a mid-level Pak-Mil Army officer assigned to General Headquarters wondered whether Bajaur had been "worth it," telling poloff this question was being quietly debated within the officer corps. He said some officers were questioning whether the loss of 42 young soldiers in a single attack was a justifiable in a war "that is not our war." On November 14, an ISI operations officer told poloff that his colleagues were asking the same questions. "Seeing those boys die was painful for us," he said. Pakistan's Ambassador to Afghanistan, who also attended the Tripartite Commission

Plenary Session, told poloff the West had established and strengthened religious extremists on the Pak-Afghan border during the anti-Soviet jihad and now had unrealistic expectation about how quickly they could be contained. "We are the ones paying for your decisions of 30 years ago," he said. While retired officers publishing letters in national newspapers have been quick to decry the lack of physical security at Dargai, they also have complained that the Government should have known that retaliation to Bajaur would be painful and asked whether it would be worth it.

16. (C) Comment: Office of Defense Representative - Pakistan (ODRP) notes that it is not surprising that the officer corps, who were genuinely pained by Dargai, is debating the precipitating event. Power and decision making authority in the Pakistan military is concentrated at the very top, and the concerns of more junior officers normally do not affect the decision making processes. That said, it is reasonable to assume that GOP civilian and military officials --at the best of times defensive over suggestions that Pakistan could do more the War on Terror -- will be even more sensitive to such criticism since Dargai. End Comment.

And in the NWFP

ISLAMABAD 00022024 003 OF 003

17. (C) Consulate Peshawar reports that public opinion on the Bajaur strike was molded by early reporting that characterized the Pak-Mil operation as an attack on a "religious school" that was full of "young children." The angry rhetoric of local politicians and the absence of a strong and coordinated message from Islamabad in the first hours after the operation reinforced negative public perceptions that have been difficult to overcome. The Consulate adds that the suicide bombing at Dargai may have blunted some of the public anger over Bajaur, reporting that Dargai has caused some in the NWFP to revise their opinion of the activities and associates of the "madrassa."

Comment

18. (C) Comment: Emboffs and other non-Pakistani observers have quietly shared their surprise over the secular opposition's rush to blame the deaths of 42 soldiers at Dargai on the government, rather than on the extremist terrorists who carried out the attack. Without discounting the passionate op-eds on the Bajaur airstrike and Dargai suicide bombing that have filled local newspapers, it is equally striking that neither Bajaur nor Dargai has resonated deeply enough in the general population to produce much in the way of public demonstration or street-level outcry. While the PPP, PML-N, and MMA have tried to score political points through their responses to the Bajaur and Dargai attacks, their attempts so far have fallen flat. Similarly, outside of military circles, outrage over the Dargai tragedy have been muted...perhaps out of shock that militants could and would directly target the core of central government authority. While theories on why the public has been so quiet abound, no one we speak with believes that a sea change is imminent. Had the optics been different, or if the religious parties were not still recovering from financial and political backlash following the violent and destructive "Danish cartoon" riots in February 2005, we could have witnessed much noisier reactions to these incidents. End Comment.
CROCKER